Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

56 | Spring 2011
Special Issue: The Image and the Short Story in English

The Image and its Discontents: Hawthorne, Poe, and the Double Bind of 'Iconoclash'

Peter Gibian

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1138
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 September 2011
ISBN: 0294-0442
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Peter Gibian, « The Image and its Discontents: Hawthorne, Poe, and the Double Bind of 'Iconoclash' », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 56 | Spring 2011, Online since 01 June 2013, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1138

The Image and its Discontents: Hawthorne, Poe, and the Double Bind of 'Iconoclash'

Peter Gibian

1 Organizing a wide-ranging art exhibition in 2002, Bruno Latour introduced the term "iconoclash" to define the dynamics of a fascinating, seemingly universal cultural phenomenon: our love-hate relation with images. The newly-coined term was necessary, in Latour's view, to convey the double nature of the process through which *iconoclasm*—the human urge to critique and destroy images—is so often expressed or acted upon in association with its twin, and seeming opposite, *iconophilia* : idol worship, the human impulse to enthrallment with visual figures of mediation. For Latour, this dialectical cycling between iconoclasm and iconophilia is experienced by the human subject as a form of Batesonian double bind : the two irreconcilable impulses always seem to arise together, calling upon us in the same moment, even as they drive us in contrary directions (Latour ;Besançon ; Bateson).

2 Whatever we may think about the universal validity of this vision, Latour's definition of the double bind of "iconoclash" certainly provides a perfect introduction to the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne. These are precisely the dynamic tensions that are played out at the center of many of Hawthorne's self-conscious, self-questioning early works of the late 1830s and early 1840s. His obsessive concern with the visual image is evident even in the titles of tales such as "The Prophetic Pictures" (1837), "Fancy's Show Box" (1837), "Edward Randolph's Portrait" (1838), "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844), "Drowne's Wooden Image" (1844), and "The Snow-Image" (1850). But the double-bind relation to such images is most fully figured in two complex, important early stories : "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836) and "The Birth-mark" (1843). And the dynamics of this dialectic are then brought even more clearly to the fore in a telling public dialogue between Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe in this period, with the two closely related authors testing opposed impulses as part of a shared exploration of questions fundamental to their literary project—questions about the aesthetic and

psychological implications of a fixation on the image. In April and May of 1842, Poe published in *Graham's Magazine* both his now-famous, celebratory review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* and the first version of a key story, "The Oval Portrait," written as a commentary on and corrective to Hawthorne's "The Prophetic Pictures"—a tale in which Hawthorne raises questions about the life-altering powers of an image-based art. "The Birth-mark," written in the following year, then constituted, among other things, Hawthorne's long-meditated response to the challenge posed by Poe's "The Oval Portrait." And finally, in 1845, Poe published his much-revised, second version of the "The Oval Portrait" at least in part as an answer to "The Birth-mark"—once again to consider and to counter Hawthorne's vision of art, aesthetic figuration, and the figure-making artist.

3 Through this series of paired tales and reviews, then, these two prime shapers of the short story form used each other as sounding boards as they worked to establish their literary careers in the early 1840s—a moment of marked cultural and literary self-consciousness provoked by the shock of great transformations in the American cultural landscape. An age of aesthetic ferment that witnessed the emergence of a surprising number of new writers, contributing in diverse ways to the first truly broad-based development of a distinctive American literature, the decade of the 1840s brought to the fore with new intensity a range of questions about the place and power of the image: it was a period when many authors and painters felt compelled to respond to the threat of a major new visual technology—photography; a period of major challenges to the dominance of an anti-aesthetic, anti-iconic Puritan theology; and, at the same time, with the exploratory work of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, a crucial period for the formation and development of the modern short story.

Hawthorne's "Icono-clash": "The Minister's Black Veil" and the Horror of Symbolism

4 Hawthorne's early career is fascinating for the way in which his self-reflexive stories play out the author's unease about representation itself, his fundamentally conflicted relation to his own medium—and especially to the insistence of the iconic verbal-visual image that seems, for Hawthorne, to epitomize that medium. Preparing the ground for his extended meditation on the social, psychological, and aesthetic functioning of the elaborately embroidered letter A at the center of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)—a verbal symbol that becomes an almost magically powerful visual icon—Hawthorne's early tales often revolve around the mysterious power of a single image. Characters and readers in these minimalist works come to focus or fixate their emotional energy on their response to a single, monolithic visual symbol, in each case a figure that disfigures a human identity—a serpent appearing out of a man's chest ; a black veil appearing to cover a minister's face ; a hand-shaped birthmark emerging on a new wife's cheek. The recurring, self-reflexive plot is, then, simply the tracing of what Philippe Hamon calls the "image drive"—or the "image-drive" gone mad (7). These tales compulsively explore, again and again, the question of how a single unchanging, opaque, surreally intensified image can invade and take over a life, a consciousness, a story—so that all else fades away into a dim background. They are all, of necessity, very short short stories, because they enact the over-arching theme of confinement—tracing a narrowing or constriction in the focus of consciousness. The tales' central characters

are often artist-figures who find themselves imprisoned, walled-in, by the over-determining power of the "image-drive," restricted in their thought or expression to visual icons that flatten life rather than conveying its richness and that conceal as much as they reveal. And the tales' narrators, in the same way, find themselves trapped within the rigid confines of a verbal mode they describe as Romance, allegory, or symbolism—but that we might term fetishization, or, more generally, reification.

5 These are overwhelmingly image-centered works, then, but they speak at the same time for a powerful, fundamental horror of the image. As Charles Feidelson puts it, in a seminal study exploring both Hawthorne's anticipation of modern symbolism and his profoundly ambivalent relation to the written symbol : "The truth is that symbolism at once fascinated and horrified him" (14). Perhaps reflecting in some ways the inheritance of a Puritan suspicion of "graven images" as material embodiments of thought or spirit, Hawthorne's analysis also develops out of more modern, nineteenth-century concerns with the psychological implications of a fixation on the hardened image as fetish. Key early works, such as "The Minister's Black Veil" and "The Birth-mark," show how Hawthorne's vision of the "symbol" or the "image" that is so central to his own process of writing and imagining highlights two dynamics : one psychological and one verbal. As Richard Brodhead observes, Hawthorne becomes obsessed with analysis of one specific psychological state—obsession, or monomania—and its close association with a singular mode of figuration : a verbal mode that tends to seize upon certain objects or aspects of human beings, "freeze-framing" them to take them out of the flow of life, and then transforming them into heavily charged signs or symbols (35-36). The central characters in both "The Birth-mark" and "The Minister's Black Veil," for example, are artistic emblem-makers who select and then fixate on a single, reified visual image (a facial mark, a veil) that, in each case, hardens into an unchanging, mysterious, opaque sign. And the result of this visual fixation is the same for both characters : it takes over their lives ; it separates them from sympathetic social interaction with other humans—in fact in each plot it leads to a willfully shattered marriage. As energies formerly channeled into Eros (or intimate human relations) are rechanneled into relations with visual icons, the artist figure finds that the icon (mark or veil) literally comes between him and other people. To summarize the point here, we might invoke the moralistic language of many of the prefaces Hawthorne wrote to his short story collections, warning about the dangers latent in his own authorial tendencies toward what he calls allegory or symbolism : life-enhancing, flowing, warm energies of the heart can become warped as they are diverted into cold manipulation of fixed, hardened, unchanging symbols.

6 Hawthorne's central ambivalence to the seemingly unavoidable relation between the short story and the "image drive" is expressed in the paradoxical, or internally contradictory, stances of the central characters here—who seem to be exploring and experiencing the double bind of "iconoclash" just as Latour describes it. In "The Birth-mark," the scientist, Aylmer, who becomes pathologically obsessed with a facial "birthmark" that he hones in on as the sole object of his study, makes that visual mark the image of the physical materiality and mortality that he wants to deny. The image that so fascinates him, that he selects, brings out, and invests with projected meaning, finally takes over his life as the embodiment of all that he wants to destroy. His symbolist arts are employed, then, both to give the birthmark its talismanic power and then to attempt to erase it. "The Minister's Black Veil" works even more directly as an

allegory about the heart's allegorizing tendencies. Like Aylmer, the minister here is a verbal worker (a preacher) whose obsession with mortal man's deviation from the mode of pure, unmediated revelation available in the ideal afterlife leads him to become morbidly fixated on his own fallen, imagistic medium—described as "a medium that saddened the whole world" (380). The veil that he places permanently over his face —or that descends, through a movement of over-determining destiny, over his face— becomes, literally and figuratively, the image of man-made mediation, the visual symbol of the symbolic nature of all language. But this veil also remains the only language available to the minister with which he might gesture toward his ideal : the desired state of final, fully-unveiled revelation. So Reverend Hooper fabricates and puts on this fetishized, iconic "black veil," allows it to take over his life, to hide his face, to come between him and others, at the same time that he becomes married to it, he needs it, as an admonition, and as a signifier pointing to its opposite : the iconoclast's idealist dream of unmediated expression. Here, though, Hooper finds himself turning in circles : his iconoclasm must be expressed through a compulsive form of idol worship ; donning the veil to protest against it, he finally suggests that unveiling can only be figured through the image of the veil. By the end of the tale, when what was at first a simple piece of cloth has emerged as an overwhelming, mesmerizing, inescapable icon, Hooper's dilemma of entrapment within his medium can stand as an epitome of the deconstructionist lesson summarized by J. Hillis Miller : the story of the veil "is the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling" (51). Indeed, in this story about mysterious secrets, every unveiling only seems to reveal another veil ; every attempt at confession or revelation (like the veil taken on by Hooper, warning against secrecy while diverting attention from his own secret, buried motives) is also revealed as a further concealment. Latour's words seem to sum up the fundamental ambivalences here in the position of Hawthorne as well as of Reverend Hooper—a verbal worker in the church whose central preoccupation with the Biblical prohibition on the making of "graven images" leaves him caught between irreconcilable demands in a debilitating double bind :

> "The second commandment is all the more terrifying since there is no way to obey it. The only thing you can do to pretend you observe it is to *deny* the work of your own hands, to *repress* the action ever present in the making, fabrication, construction, and production of images, to *erase* the writing at the same time you are writing it, to *slap* your hands at the same time they are manufacturing. And with no hand, what will you do ? With no image, to what truth will you have access ? . . . Can we measure the misery of those who have to produce images and are forbidden to confess they are making them ?" (Latour 23)

7 More complex and multi-leveled than "The Birth-mark," Hawthorne's story about the misery of this self-divided minister expresses the author's own ambivalences through the double nature of its conclusions—as it leaves readers with two contradictory perspectives on the final position of the veiled Reverend Hooper. On the one hand, Hooper's obsession with this "mysterious emblem," a single, fixed imagistic figure, is seen to wall him in, allowing him a life of cloistered, monastic purity—denying the possibility of marriage, cutting off worldly relations, and thus making possible uncorrupted contemplation of the afterlife (381). At the same time, though, his symbolist arts also have the effect of permanently separating him from social life : "All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world : it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love" (382). With the veil as his only intimate relation, he becomes a ghost, dead to this world, losing his humanity. In fact,

in the eyes of his parishioners, he becomes the veil ; when they look at him, the veil is all they see ; the veil thus transforms him, taking over his image and identity. But here Hawthorne's story combines such now-familiar admonitions about the horror and limits of symbolism with a simultaneous evocation of the other side of the question—concluding with a paradoxical recognition of the mysterious, visionary, transformative potency of the image-making artist and his imagistic arts. Though the black veil may leave him imprisoned in monastic isolation, it also makes Hooper a compelling, awe-inspiring verbal performer who is able to use the medium of the veil to communicate powerfully with his parishioners. During his formal sermons, the veil becomes a vehicle through which he can speak to and transform his congregation, penetrating and expressing their secrets, their souls. Though donning the veil means he sacrifices his private, intimate life to exist only as an image, in the realm of images this somehow gives the minister an "awful power," and an unexpected centrality as a public figure (381). Crowds of new church-members now begin to travel from miles around to hear him preach. In the double vision of "The Minster's Black Veil," then, a public is formed around the expressions of an isolated image-worker who represents the social whole but, because of the nature of his medium, cannot himself be a part of it.

The Power of the Image: Hawthorne and Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

8 These ambivalences about the aesthetic image are what led Hawthorne to enter into an extended public dialogue with Poe—a dialogue that began for Hawthorne with publication of "The Birth-mark" (1843), which, as we have noted, can be seen as a revisionary reading of Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842), taking that work as the point of departure for a fascinated and worried meditation on the founding dynamics of Poe's aesthetic—and on the closeness of that aesthetic to Hawthorne's own.

9 "The Oval Portrait" is a highly wrought miniature recognized by many as an epitome of Poe's aesthetic vision. Baudelaire placed it last, as the summary story, in one of his volumes of Poe translations ; Jean Epstein and Luis Bunuel, in their classic 1928 Poe film "La Chute de la maison Usher," merged the plots of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Oval Portrait" to make their cinematic work a paradigmatic Poe experience ; and this mini-tale, centering on the powerful, over-determining life-force seen to be immanent within a painting, is (along with Hawthorne's related story, "The Prophetic Pictures") a key precursor to a line of later-nineteenth-century fiction leading through several Henry James stories to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. So it seems fitting that Poe's contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne made "The Oval Portrait" the locus of a clarifying exchange with Poe in 1842-43.

10 But of course this exchange involved much more than a simple, coincidental likeness between two tales. In these years Poe and Hawthorne were following each step in the other's progress with intense interest. By the early 1840s, then, Hawthorne could hardly have missed the remarkably close connections between Poe's literary experiments and his own—with Poe evolving in some ways as Hawthorne's double, or dark twin, in this formative period for the modern short story. Eerily parallel to Hawthorne's work, many Poe plots also center on exploration of the pathology of the "image drive," featuring monomaniacally obsessed central characters who exteriorize their inner energies by investing them in everyday visual objects that then return as

haunting, over-powering, iconic fetish images driving them to destructive, and self-destructive, actions : the black cat in "The Black Cat" (1843) ; the beating heart and Evil Eye in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) ; the raven in "The Raven" (1845) ; the old urban wanderer in "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) ; and so on.

11 And certainly Poe was far from unconscious of the uncanny resemblance between these two bodies of work. Indeed, in his own typically sly, perverse way, he recognized and brought to the fore the intimacy of his aesthetic relation with Hawthorne in the conclusion of his landmark 1842 review of *Twice-Told Tales*, when he raised the vexed question of plagiarism : "In 'Howe's Masquerade,' we observe something which resembles a plagiarism—but which *may be* a very flattering coincidence of thought" (644, 648-50). This suggestion that Hawthorne's "Howe's Masquerade" is in part a copy of Poe's "William Wilson" was plainly absurd—since there was in fact very little resemblance between the two story passages put forward as evidence in Poe's review, and "William Wilson" appeared a year later than Hawthorne's tale. But it did allow Poe to highlight in this way the "flattering coincidence" of his thought with Hawthorne's—while at the same time betraying acute anxiety about that aesthetic intimacy, and denying that the lines of borrowing in this case actually place his work not as the original but as a copy. In the end, though, Poe's accusation, calling attention to the question of plagiarism, rebounded back on him, as it had the effect of leading newly-attuned readers to discover other examples of Poe's significant borrowings from Hawthorne in this period. Indeed, alongside his review of *Twice-Told Tales*, in the same May 1842 issue of *Graham's Magazine,* Poe published a story titled "The Mask of the Red Death" (later revised and renamed "The Masque of the Red Death")—a work clearly incorporating key elements appropriated from "Howe's Masquerade" and the three other stories in Hawthorne's series titled "Legends of the Province House." As Robert Regan explains, the Poe who denounced plagiarism here was himself, at the same time, "a flagrantly public plagiarist" : "Far from masking his 'plagiary,' Poe's charge [against Hawthorne] calls attention to it. He invites the careful reader—the *very* careful reader—to see "The Mask of the Red Death" as a critical exercise which out-Hawthornes Hawthorne" (292, 296).

12 And a month earlier, alongside his first critical notice of Hawthorne in *Graham's Magazine* forApril 1842, Poe had published the first version of "The Oval Portrait" (under its initial title "Life in Death")—which, Richard Fusco suggests, can be read in the same way as a critical fiction, a review in fictional form, developing an analysis and commentary on Hawthorne's vision of art. This time Poe's story, not so much a plagiaristic copy as a conscious critique, is modeled on and in response to Hawthorne's "The Prophetic Pictures," an important, self-reflexive tale exploring the ur-plot that, as we have noted, would be reprised in a line of works from James's "The Story of a Masterpiece" and "The Liar" to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—the story of an artist (here characteristically figured as a painter) endowed with a quasi-divine ability to produce aesthetic representations (here visual images) that have the visionary power not only to reflect natural, temporal reality but also to transfigure it, to form it or control it, to penetrate its soul, to take over its spirit, its "life." But while Hawthorne's fable begins by evoking the dream of an iconic art of marvelous agency, in the end the self-divided tale registers Hawthorne's deep ambivalence about this aesthetic ideal, finally turning away from this dream as his narration raises ethical questions about the dangers of such an urge to dominance. Here, as in many Hawthorne works in this line, successful aesthetic figuration is seen to tear apart the fabric of intimate social life,

leading to the prideful alienation of the artist and the shattered marriage of his subjects. And though his portraits give the painter a magical, God-like power to regulate human destinies, the tale finally seems to renounce what is described as the "spell of evil influence" in such dark arts (468). But Poe's revision of the tale in "Life in Death" intervenes to make the counter-argument. According to Fusco, Poe, both "inspired" and "inflamed" by Hawthorne's vision, decided to "respond in kind, . . . that is, to retaliate by mocking Hawthorne's aesthetic" (33). If Hawthorne was too timorous to see his plot through to the end, to face up to its full implications, and thus in the end trivialized the powerful potential of the aesthetic imagination, Poe would produce a short fable unambiguously celebrating the artist as a god-like creator and embracing the power of ambitious, image-based art to transfigure life.

13 But the intertextual exchange between "Life in Death" and "The Prophetic Pictures" was only the point of departure for further turns in the more developed dialogue to come. With his glowing review celebrating Hawthorne's genius and claiming close kinship with it, and two markedly Hawthorne-esque stories backing up those claims, Poe had not only attracted Hawthorne's keen attention but also called out for a response. And the response came in "The Birth-mark," Hawthorne's revisionary reading of Poe's "Life in Death." Echoing Regan, we might say that, with "The Birth-mark," Hawthorne is working to out-Poe Poe—or to get Poe out of his system (296). Poe continued to keep the intertextual exchange alive, though, with the republication in April 1845 of "Life in Death"—now titled "The Oval Portrait." As D. M. McKeithan suggests, the major revisions Poe made before this republication can be seen to have been inspired, in large part, by his careful reading of "The Birth-mark" (258).

"A Modern Pygmalion": Art and Idolatry — Anticipating Aestheticism

14 Both "The Oval Portrait" and "The Birth-mark" take up a modified version of the Pygmalion story—actually an inversion of the classic Pygmalion story—as a way of meditating on the impulses at the basis of the "image drive," in the process developing a prescient shared sense of the founding dynamics of later-nineteenth-century Aestheticism. (The fact that the Pygmalion myth was very much on Hawthorne's mind as he wrestled with questions about the imagistic mode of his own stories is made clear in "Drowne's Wooden Image," a closely related work written in this same period, which develops as a conscious, over-obvious reworking of the classic plot. Here the painter John Singleton Copley, visiting the workshop of a humble Boston wood-carver who seems to have become involved in idolatrous worship of a bejeweled female figure he has sculpted, observes how this craftsman's passion for the "mysterious image" gives it a miraculous physical and spiritual "life" that is absent in the "stolid," hard, cold "abortions" of his other carvings, and marvels at the transformation in both artist and art work that has made the rude Yankee artisan, for at least one moment, into "a modern Pygmalion" (934-40).) In "The Birth-mark," Hawthorne's central artist/scientist addresses his new bride in a speech directly summarizing the mythic thinking basic to this aesthetic ideal : "What will be my triumph, when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect, in her fairest work ! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be" (768). Adapting the Pygmalion plot in "The Oval Portrait" and "The Birth-mark," both Poe and Hawthorne

conjure the vision of a mode of aesthetic creation that might surpass natural creation ; an Art that is separate from and a rival to Nature ; an Art forged through the sublimation or rechanneling of Eros ; Art as a form of Idolatry. Enacting this aesthetic theory, both plots follow an isolated, male artist figure as he becomes obsessively fixated on hard, unchanging fetish objects that trouble his natural relation with an inspiring female figure of desire. The dialogic relation between these two stories thus raises key questions not only about the fascination and horror of symbolism in antebellum America, but also about notions of gender embedded within articulations of this shared aesthetic vision.

15 The classical Pygmalion story follows the development of a male sculptor who has no interest in worldly women but then falls in love with the ideal beauty of his own sculpture of a woman. At first this seems to involve a narcissistic or introverted worship of his own work, of his own creation, of something he can wall in and completely control—more than he could any more differentiated, exterior, imperfect, independent entity created by God or Nature. And early on this dead-end position is expressed in kinky, perverted, and silly forms of fetishism and idolatry—as the artist clothes and bejewels the sculpture, caresses it, gives it a name, and so on. But finally, when he gets his wish and the sculpture does come to life, the sculptor finds himself humbled and admonished by his artwork, realizing that he should never have shunned living women. So he learns from his artwork to turn from art back to life. And in the process of this turn, he also humbles himself before Aphrodite—a female god with great creative powers.

16 But if the classical myth thus works in the end as a challenge to the doctrine of art for art's sake—the artist here breaks from his idol, and wishes his art could have life—in both Hawthorne and Poe things move in just the opposite direction. These narratives are not about art coming to life, but about art coming to have a life of its own. The central artist figures here will put up with a loss of physical life as a sort of collateral damage necessary to the pursuit of art ; in each case, the artist transfers his affections and his visual gaze from the "living object of desire" to the inanimate aesthetic image of that love object. Becoming married to his art, the creator begins to love his perfect, ideal representation of that love object's life (or of his love for that life) more than he loves the living figure herself. Rechanneling Eros into art, the artist finds that the art object he produces then preserves his love for eternity, even if the mortal, temporal, fleshly female object of that love falls by the wayside. Indeed, in both plots, the life of art, and of the visual image, is seen to be founded upon the death of the female subject of representation, and the male artist's creation is seen to develop out of a rivalry with the creative powers of a female Mother Nature. Women can create life ; men can create art.

17 In their basic outlining of this proto-Aesthetic version of the Pygmalion story, Hawthorne and Poe are registering and playing out a strong mid-century American fascination with and anxiety about aesthetic representation, the uses of symbols, or graven images—perhaps even (especially in Poe's case) anticipating more twentieth-century, Benjaminian concerns about aesthetic reproduction and the decline of "aura," about "simulacra" and a crisis in representation brought to the fore by the advent of photography, panoramas, and other extensions of realist art (Benjamin ; Rothberg 4). In both of these plots, the perfect portrait-replica threatens to destroy the original object

through its power to make possible infinite replication of that object's form—or its idea.

18 "The Oval Portrait" follows the results of an artist's compulsive portraiture of his wife, "a maiden of rarest beauty" (298). A prototypical Aesthetic type, he lives austerely in and for his art. In fact he has pushed this aesthetic devotion to the point of Decadence—he has a "bride in his Art" (298)—and in the service of Beauty he will live the truth of Poe's own dictum : the "death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (680). When he walls his fleshly wife into his workshop space, turning his gaze resolutely from the woman to the portrait emerging on the canvas, the interminable sittings destroy her health and her spirit, with each brush stroke seeming to transfer another drop of blood and vitality from her body to her effigy on the canvas. The tale ends as the artist's triumph—his monstrous completed painting is "indeed Life itself !"—reduces his wife to a corpse : "She was dead !" (299).

"The Birth-mark"—Hawthorne's Response to his Dark Twin: Renouncing the Dark Arts

19 In Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" the central artist figure, Aylmer, also enters the story attempting to negotiate a balance between his marriage to his scientific/aesthetic studies and his love for his new bride, Georgiana. And he too soon turns away from his wife to fixate his visual gaze and his emotional life on a fetish image of her—in this case a synecdochic figure of his own creation : the birthmark. Although he is initially presented more as a scientist/philosopher than as an artist, then, Aylmer's relation to his wife comes to center on the workings of his symbolist arts. Hawthorne's tale thus underscores the ways in which the philosophical critic of the image, the image-destroyer, is, at the same time, an obsessive image-user and image-maker. Aylmer's cold, inhuman, scientific stare is what first brings the mark out on his shocked wife's suddenly pale face ; seizing upon this naturally-occurring mark, his blinkered vision then removes it from the flow of everyday life, converting it into a hieratic visual icon invested with magical potency and significance. Fastening upon this image as the sole object of his further studies, he moves Georgiana out of their home to a new place inside the controlling walls of his laboratory—and thus (in a move typical of many Hawthorne characters) transforms an intimate human relationship into an intellectual experiment. Repelled by this figure that in his eyes disfigures Georgiana, he nonetheless soon finds that the birthmark comes to dominate any vision of her. But a heightened focus on this image also seems to be the only means to respond to its power. Channeling all his energies into work on this mark, Aylmer then discovers that it takes over his inner life; he too, along with Georgiana, becomes a victim of the powerful image he has constructed.

20 The birthmark provokes this artist, most fundamentally, as a symbol of the woman's fleshly mortality; to him it is the mark that she was born, and so will die. Its physical form also comes to represent, more generally, her physical existence—the fact that, like all humans, she is grounded on this earth as well as potentially angelic ; the fact that her life involves bodily form as well as spiritual idea. In manipulating and attacking the bodily mark, Aylmer then is working to eradicate Georgiana's ties to material, bodily existence—to eradicate her physicality (including, it seems, the threat of her sexuality). Paradoxically, he uses this physical form—a mark in the flesh—to express his idealist

vision. But if the birthmark is a sign that Georgiana was born into the natural creation, Aylmer will work to take her out of that creation (clearly marked in the story as the realm of a female Mother Nature), to erase this mark of the original creator—and thus to produce a perfect image of her that is fully his own creation. The final goal of such an experiment with the birthmark would be to see Georgiana erased from the book of life and written into Aylmer's great book—the lab journal and testament that records all of the attempts of this artist/creator to triumph over Nature, to capture or recreate life in a perfect, non-temporal, non-physical form.

21 But if "The Birth-mark" thus shares founding impulses with Poe's "The Oval Portrait," Hawthorne finally develops, on the basis of these shared premises, a very different narrative—implying an opposed response to the aesthetic vision played out in these paired plots. First, his scientist/artist figure produces no physical object ; no *thing* is created that will remain after the woman is gone. While in Poe the painter does succeed in passing down the art object that he produced, the male artist in Hawthorne, here more of an idealist philosophical seeker than a physical creator, uses his symbolist, imagistic arts not only to construct and manipulate the image that enthralls him but also, finally, to destroy that image. Working to erase a physical mark rather than to create one, Aylmer is seeking to sever his wife's ties to flesh and physicality, to take her out of mortal creation so that she could take a place in his own disembodied, perfectionist vision. At the story's conclusion, then, when perfecting her turns out to take her out of earthly life, Aylmer is left alone with his philosophical ideal.

22 Secondly, and most crucially, Hawthorne's tale approaches the central artist's actions through the point of view of a detached, moralizing, judgmental narrator, while in Poe's tale readers follow (and identify with) the much-less-detached progress of a viewer-within-the-tale as he is drawn into absorbed enthrallment before the artist's painting. If "The Birth-mark" develops through a singular focus on the psychology of the artist/scientist Aylmer, Poe's tale divides its focus to follow two plots associated with two main characters. And although "The Oval Portrait" concludes with a vision of one of these characters, the painter, recreating the dramatic scene of his completion of the portrait, the story begins with an extended, first-person introduction to the point-of-view and psychology of the narrator—who is also given a key role in Poe's work as the character who views the portrait, reads critical literature about it, and responds to it. The emphasis on the experience of this model reader-within-the-text is what fundamentally distinguishes Poe's vision from Hawthorne's. In "The Oval Portrait," this narrator/viewer emerges as a prototypical Poe character—a relative of Roderick Usher and many others : a highly educated, last-of-the-line aristocrat stranded inside a ruined chateau full of bizarre art. Sick, wounded, hypersensitive, delirious, he is hardly presented as an objective or neutral observer. In fact, in the first published version of the story, "Life in Death" (of 1842), where Poe places an even greater stress on this character's role and perspective, his experiments with pain-killing opium are seen from the beginning to have left him with "reeling senses" and marked boundary problems, so that he struggles to distinguish external sense perceptions from internal dreams, projections, or feverish hallucinations (296). This narrator-reader, then, expresses himself less through action than through intense personal reaction to a host of exotic stimuli—a stance that leaves him especially susceptible to the shock of a first viewing of the oval portrait. Thus, while Hawthorne's narrative structure leaves his readers detached from Aylmer and his fraught interactions with the birthmark, Poe's narrator, when he encounters the portrait, does not judge it in terms of its moral or

ethical effects, or speculate about multiple possible responses to it, but instead finds himself immediately carried away by it. He relives it. Ravished by a compelling emotional connection with the painted figure, he re-experiencesthe artist's complex, multi-leveled affective response at the moment of the painting's completion—feeling again a combination of wonder and horror at this triumph of art. The painted simulacrum here thus makes possible a reproduction or repetition, across the ages, not only of a sense of the "life" of the female subject but also of the love of the painter—his aesthetic response to that life.

23 While in the Hawthorne story the focus is on the husband-wife relation, and then on the loss of the potential of that relational life along with the loss of the life of the young bride, in Poe's version the woman's role is minimal. She remains mainly the initial object of the gaze, the raw material to be objectified in art. The Poe story's emphasis is much more clearly on the mystery of the bizarre moment of shared feeling—bridging a separation of space and time—that the painting has made possible between the tale's two central male characters. In Poe's allegory of aesthetic process, the dying woman is the necessary subject or material for art, the painter is the producer of art, and the narrator models the process of the reception of art. The woman's death is mainly valued as it makes possible the production of the visual representation of her, which in turn makes possible the intimate sharing of "love" and "life" between the artist and his specially-attuned audience—through the mediation of the work of art.

24 While Hawthorne's narrative, then, becomes a horror story about a self-divided aesthetic impulse combining fascination with, fixation on, and fear of the visual image that leads to ethical failure and human loss—placing the accent on the life that has been lost in the present—Poe's parallel narrative centers on evocation of the titillating horror seen to be foundational to the making of the aesthetic image—and thus to the success of the timeless work of art that lives on in the enthralled, affective responses of future readers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bateson, G., Jackson, D., Haley, J., & Weakland, J. "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia." *Behavioral Science* 1 (1956) : 251-264.

Besançon, Alain. *The Forbidden Image : An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. Chicago : U of Chicago P, 2000.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility : Third Version." *Selected Writings : Volume 4, 1938-40*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott and others. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA : Harvard UP, 2003. 251-83.

Brodhead, Richard H. *The School of Hawthorne*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

Feidelson, Charles, Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953.

Fusco, Richard. "Poe's 'Life' and Hawthorne's 'Death' : A Literary Debate." *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism* 35.1-2 (2002) : 31-37.

Hamon, Philippe. *Imageries, littérature et image au XIXe siècle.* Paris : Corti, 2001.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Tales and Sketches*. Ed. Roy Harvey Pearce. New York : Library of America, 1982.

---. *The Scarlet Letter*. *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne.* Ed. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude Simpson. *vol.* 1. Columbus : Ohio State UP, 1962.

James, Henry. "The Story of a Masterpiece," "The Liar." *Complete Stories.* 5 vols.New York : Library of America, 1999.

Latour, Bruno. "What is Iconoclash ? Or is There a World Beyond the Image Wars ?" *Iconoclash : Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*. Eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2002. 14-37.

McKeithan, D. M. "Poe and the Second Edition of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*." *Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal 1974* (1975) : 258-267.

Miller, J. Hillis. *Hawthorne and History*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe.* Ed. G. R. Thompson. New York : Norton, 2004.

Regan, Robert."Hawthorne's 'Plagiary' ; Poe's Duplicity." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25.3 (Dec. 1970): 281-98.

Rothberg, Michael. "The Prostitution of Paris : Late Capital of the Twentieth Century." *Found Object* 1 (Fall 1992) : 2-22.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. Michael P. Gillespie. New York : Norton, 2007.

ABSTRACTS

Le concept d'« iconoclash », forgé par Bruno Latour, qui explique comment l'iconoclasme est si souvent associé avec son apparent opposé, l'iconophilie, offre un moyen très pertinent de comprendre un grand nombre des premières nouvelles auto-réflexives et métatextuelles écrites par Nathaniel Hawthorne. Une telle relation d'ambivalence envers les images est essentiellement représentée par les positions paradoxales des personnages principaux dans deux contes complexes de Hawthorne. Dans « Le Voile noir du pasteur », l'iconoclasme de Hooper s'exprime par une forme compulsive d'idôlatrie ; dans « La Tache de naissance », Aylmer se sert de ses créations symbolistes pour donner à la tache le pouvoir d'un talisman puis il tente de l'effacer. En outre, le mouvement de cette dialectique est mis en valeur d'autant plus clairement par un dialogue public révélateur qui a eu lieu à cette époque entre Hawthorne et Edgar Allan Poe. Ce dialogue porte sur deux contes allant de pair, « Le Portrait ovale » et « La Tache de naissance », qui offrent des réponses différentes à des questions communes sur les implications esthétiques et psychologiques de l'obsession pour l'image.

AUTHORS

PETER GIBIAN

Peter Gibian is an Associate Professor in the English Department at McGill University. His publications include an edited essay collection, *Mass Culture and Everyday Life* (Routledge 1997) and *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (Cambridge UP, 2001), as well as essays on Poe, Whitman, Melville, Twain, Doctor Holmes, Justice Holmes, John Singer Sargent, Wharton and James, Edward Everett Hale, Michael Snow and shopping mall spectacle, the experience of nineteenth-century shopping arcades, and cosmopolitanism in nineteenth-century American literature. He is just completing a new book exploring the mid-century "culture of conversation" as it shaped the writings of a wide range of authors, and is at work on an ongoing project on the relation of a line of nineteenth-century American writers to the cosmopolitan vision of a "traveling culture."